

On July 11th, 1992, the ordinary Serbian men of a small town in northern Bosnia and Herzegovina, rounded up all the Muslim men and boys, marched them a mile outside the town to the soccer stadium, and forced them to lay face down in the grass. The men in both groups ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-five. Both groups consisted of local government employees, farm and factory workers, shop workers, electricians, lumber workers, and plumbers. Through the eyes of an outsider, it would have been impossible to tell how the two groups differed, if they differed at all. These men all went to the same schools, drank in the same bars, and were treated in the same hospital when they fell ill. Their kids played on the same playgrounds, and their wives worked in the same textile factory. They had all, at one point or another, passed each other in the street and tipped their heads in polite greeting. Despite the growing ethnic tensions of the previous few years, all had lived in relative harmony up until that particular Saturday morning, the first day of the official ethnic cleansing in that particular section of northern Bosnia.

The story of *The Ordinary Men* of the Police Battalion 101 is unsettling to say the least, but for some, it's far from unique. All over the world, there are places where a traditional dehumanizing stereotype already exists, and those places are never short of willing executioners. Conformity, indoctrination, deference to those in charge, the need to be held in esteem by their comrades, and the unwillingness to show anything resembling cowardice, have played their part in many genocides before and since the Police Battalion 101 came into play during WWII. However, the story of *Ordinary Men* is unique in some respects. Not just in its detailed accounts of those who participated in these atrocities, but also in the cultural and historical factors that influenced them and how those factors

influenced the crimes they committed. From the perspective of a war refugee, this book essentially paints a picture of a well-known fact. Most men are capable of monstrous things, but only a few can truly be called monsters.

The Ordinary Men is an account of five hundred middle-aged men, all from middle or lower class of German society. Most were from Hamburg, “one of the least Nazified cities in Germany” [Browning 48]. These men had, in space of less than two years, directly or indirectly caused the deaths of eighty-three thousand Jews. The majority of these men consisted of working class, non-skilled laborers who had lived through different political climates before the Nazis came to power. As Browning says, “all went through their formative period in the pre-Nazi Era. These were men who had known political standards and moral norms other than those of the Nazis” [48]. Only some of these men were career policemen, but for most, their prior occupations were diverse. These were middle-aged family men from the “lower orders of German society” [Browning, 48]. Most received no schooling past the age of fifteen, and only a quarter had held office jobs prior to joining the Order Police. They had no prior military experience in German-occupied territory, with the “exception of the oldest who were World War I veterans” [Browning 44]. Since the average age of these men was thirty-nine and over a half ranged in age from thirty-seven to forty-two, one would have to assume that most remembered World War I. Even those younger in age who may not remember the war itself certainly were not exempt from the aftereffects. Germany faced a significant economic crisis following WWI. The war meant that imports and exports had halted, while all available resources were being diverted to war efforts. Post-WWI

Germany faced mass unemployment, virtually no economic growth, and a burden of having to pay out reparations to the allies under the Treaty of Versailles. To cover the war losses, the government printed more money, which resulted in hyperinflation. Aside from the economic crisis, there was also the national humiliation brought about by the Treaty, particularly the Article 231, the wording of which was interpreted to mean that Germans were guilty for causing the war. As a matter of fact, in some European nations for whom WWI and WWII are still fresh in collective memory, despite the number of years that have passed, Article 231 is known as the “War Guilt Clause.” This collective memory appears to be absent from Western culture, and an argument could be made that European geographical proximity to these wars, as well as significantly richer history, both in conflict and culture, has made an impact on the general knowledge of the populace when it comes to WWI and WWII even generations later. This “War Guilt Clause” which caused bitterness in the German population, along with the humiliation of the defeat and loss of territory, the post-war economic crisis and the Great Depression, did not by any means cause the rise of Nazi Party. However, it did create an environment ripe for its ascent. These ordinary German men of the Reserve Police had not only lived in WWI Germany, but they had also survived the post-WWI Germany, and had witnessed significant shifts in the government and the economy. When we consider their backgrounds, it is important to note their age, religion, social class, etc. However, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge their collective memory of WWI and its aftereffects.

In his criticism of Browning's book, Goldhagen claims that the pre-existing "eliminationist anti-Semitism" of these ordinary Germans only had to be "unleashed" by Hitler in order to perpetrate the Holocaust [193]. On April 8th, 1996, at the United States Holocaust Research Institute, Goldhagen stated: "Hitler's and the Nazis' eliminationist, indeed exterminationist, antisemitism was but a variation on the pre-existing dominant cultural theme." While Browning agrees that anti-Semitism "was a very significant aspect of Germany's political culture before 1945," he cautions that not all manifestations of anti-Semitism could be considered "eliminationist" [194]. In his famous diaries, Victor Klemperer recalled an incident while he was still in school in 1901 where he and his Jewish classmates did not attend class because of Yom Kippur. According to one of his non-Jewish classmates, the teacher had started the lesson by saying, "Today, it's just us." Such a seemingly insignificant recollection can have far-reaching implications; if, in 1901, the polarization between 'us' and 'them' already existed, then the propaganda and anti-Jewish sentiment prevalent in the post-WWI years only had to be cultivated. The ordinary men of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 would have been immersed in this propaganda before their first action in Poland, and the impact of it would have served to widen the existing gap. *Der Stürmer* publication (1923-1945), the Eternal Jew touring exhibition (1937-1938), *Jud Süß* (1940), newsreels from the German Weekly Perspective, children's toys that were stamped with swastikas, and school books such as *Der Giftpilz* (1936), all played their part in the dehumanization process. With the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935, which triggered the legal and social isolation of the Jewish population, and the extreme indoctrination of the German youth, these family men

could have hardly gone about their lives without feeling some of the impact of this relentless propaganda. At the very least, they would have accepted the separation between themselves and the Jewish population. As Lieutenant Drucker so eloquently put it, his attitude to Jews was “marked by a certain aversion” [Browning 151]. Perhaps the best reflection of this propaganda was illustrated when, during the interrogation, the policemen were asked “how they could tell the difference between Poles and Jews in the countryside” [Browning 152]. To which some responded by using the terms “that still reflected the Nazi stereotype,” by saying that in comparison to the Poles, the Jews were “unkempt” and “less clean” [Browning 152].

As far as indoctrination of the Order Police, Browning mentions a one-month unit on “ideological education” required in their basic training, one-week ideological training workshops for the officers, the requirement that daily information about current events and proper ideological perspectives be provided to the police, as well as the weekly sessions held by officers to their men “in which they delivered a short lecture or read an edifying excerpt from suggested books or specially prepared SS pamphlets” [178]. He also mentions the “two series of weekly circulars,” which, while rife with racist sentiment, did very little to promote the killing of Jews which was already in effect [178]. As a matter of fact, he states, “Such prose may have put readers to sleep; it certainly did not turn them into killers” [179]. Instead, these readings and pamphlets seemed focused mainly on maintaining the German racial purity and encouraging procreation among the racially pure. He concludes that none of these indoctrination techniques “could have deprived the men of Reserve Battalion 101 of the capacity for independent thought”

[184]. Indoctrination is an interesting word in this context. As defined, it is the process of instilling ideas, attitudes, or cognitive strategies, something that transfers customs and traditions through generations. Browning says that these men were “imbued in particular with a sense of their own superiority and racial kinship as well as Jewish inferiority and otherness” [184]. Based on the definition of the word however, it can be argued that the indoctrination of these men started long before the Nazi Party came into power with their books and pamphlets. In order to consider the transfer of customs and traditions through generations, one has to look back to the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, and the German-enforced slave labor in Africa. Furthermore, in one of the many required readings for college philosophy, Noah Chomsky was said to believe that indoctrination is the exact opposite of education, and that by the virtue of this opposition, it contributes to conformity. Therefore, it was not the indoctrination by itself, but the addition of resulting conformity, which played a large part in fact that “80 to 90 percent of the men proceeded to kill” [Browning 184]. Browning goes on to say that, “To break ranks and step out, to adopt overtly nonconformist behavior, was simply beyond most of the men. It was easier for them to shoot” [184].

The relationship between the officers and the men varied greatly across the units. The Commander, Wilhelm Trapp, was a career police officer, “affectionately known by his men as ‘Papa Trapp’,” who had joined the Nazi Party in 1932 but never belonged to the SS [Browning 2]. Browning states that he was “clearly not considered SS material” [45]. Commander Trapp was held in contempt by his two Police Captains, Hoffman and Wohlauf, who were both in their late twenties and had joined the SS at a young age. Of

the seven reserve lieutenants, although most belonged to the Nazi Party, none were in the SS. Of the thirty-two noncommissioned officers, twenty-seven belonged to the Nazi Party but only seven belonged to the SS. It is clear from many testimonies that certain men felt they could approach their officers and request different assignments when they felt they could not stomach killing Jews. Commander Trapp had offered a choice to those men who felt that they could not perform the “frightfully unpleasant task,” at the village of Józefów, the Order Police’s first direct introduction to the Final Solution [Browning 2]. This choice resulted in a dozen men breaking ranks, but it could also be said to have influenced the others who, throughout the day, approached their officers and asked to be given a different assignment as well. Police Captain Hoffman might have been furious at one of his men being the first to break ranks, and Police Captain Wohlauf might have refused to release the men who approached him, but most of the sergeants and lieutenants, including the First Lieutenant Hagen, excused the men who requested to be reassigned. It is clear that Commander Trapp had set a precedent, which held for the duration of the Order Police’s stay in Poland, because according to Browning, ten to twenty percent of the five hundred men either “refused to kill or stopped killing” [188]. The variety of men’s attitudes towards their officers is perhaps best illustrated by the combination of the disparaging remarks Lieutenant Buchmann was subjected to for his avoidance and aversion of the killing of Jews, the ridicule leveled at Captain Wohlauf’s pretentious attitude and Captain Hoffman’s ‘convenient’ illnesses, and the disapproval for Lieutenant Gnade’s brutality and viciousness. However, this variety of attitudes did nothing to change the fact that eighty percent of the men followed the orders of their

officers when it came to killing Jews, and that even Commander Trapp himself, despite having given his men a choice to abstain from the killing, blamed the orders he gave out on authority higher than himself.

This obedience of authority, which Browning states is a powerful factor shaping human behavior, was all the more possible due to the circumstances. If another reason is to be brought forth for the atrocities committed by the Order Police Battalion 101, then war is the easy answer. “The Jews had instigated the American boycott that had damaged Germany,” Wilhelm Trapp had said, and whether he believed it, or whether any of his men had believed it, was completely irrelevant [Browning 2]. These men might not have faced active combat before being stationed in Poland, but one has to assume due to their age, they understood the consequences of being at war, and they understood the consequences of losing one. War, any war, especially one waged in such an atmosphere under such a political party, is hardly an environment where the battalion that was considered “the dregs of the manpower pool” could question the orders of the authority [165]. Commander Trapp himself, as much as the events at village of Józefów had caused him to weep, never openly questioned the orders he was given. Browning states that, among the perpetrators, orders from those in authority were the most frequently given explanation. “The authoritarian political culture of the Nazi dictatorship, savagely intolerant of dissent, along with the standard military necessity of obedience and ruthless enforcement of discipline, created a situation in which the individuals had no choice” [Browning 170]. Browning also goes on to say, “War is the most conducive environment

in which governments can adopt ‘atrocities by policy’ and encounter few difficulties in implementing it” [162].

These policemen certainly could have refused to commit the crimes, as some of them had, and based on the testimonies of those that had refused, it seems clear that they would not have suffered any drastic consequences of that choice. Browning states that those who did not shoot “risked isolation, rejection, and ostracism – a very uncomfortable prospect within the framework of a tight-knit unit stationed abroad among a hostile population” [185]. Although some men who refused to shoot received threats from their officers that they would be reported, none were, nor are there any records of men being court-martialed or punished for refusing to obey orders to kill Jews. Those who abstained from the killing for the majority of the Order Police stay in Poland were considered to be of “weak nature,” “no men,” and “cowards.” During the Jew Hunts, those who volunteered were considered “tough,” and those who stayed in the background to avoid being chosen were considered “weak.” In an environment such as the military where the stereotypical definition of masculinity plays a large part, such insults would doubtlessly have had an effect. Yet aside from the isolation and rejection, these men suffered no other consequences. Browning says the perpetrators insisted that “Orders were orders, and no one in such a political climate could be expected to disobey them” [170]. He also says, “The punishment or censure that occasionally did result from such disobedience was never commensurate with the gravity of the crimes the men had been asked to commit” [170]. However, there is a disconnect resulting from Browning’s ability to observe each act of disobedience from a distance of fifty years. Along with the dehumanization of the

Jews in the decade prior to the Final Solution in Poland, one could argue that the “gravity of these crimes” certainly did not seem so grave to the Order Police.

In Afterword, Browning stresses the importance of authoritarian traditions and values in German political culture. He also goes on to state that, “the deference to authority and role adaptation are powerful factors shaping human behavior” [219]. Yet, he insists that, despite these authoritarian traditions, “obedience to orders out of fear of dire punishment is not a valid explanation,” and moves on to “obedience to authority” [171]. At this point I must respectfully disagree. From the distance and safety of fifty years post-Nazi Germany and the reality of the Gestapo, the presumption that fear is impossible only because no examples of punishment could be found is not a valid argument, nor could it possibly be supported. Fear response, by definition, serves survival by generating appropriate behavioral responses, and irrational fear is by no means rare, nor should fear conditioning be discounted. In Germany, ordinary citizens faced persecution if they were found to be helping Jews or sheltering them. On December 7th, 1941, it was declared that, “Aryan persons who took Jewish property for safe keeping would receive prison sentences.” The fact that the Nazi Party regularly trampled on the rights of ordinary Germans needs to be taken into consideration. The Gestapo, described in numerous texts as violence-prone believers, did not start with the elimination of Jews. They eliminated communists first, then all the other political and religious opposition. Browning himself states, “Even for the openly-Semitic conservatives, the Jewish issue was but one among many” [196]. He goes on to claim that Goldhagen “misinterprets the meaning of silence under dictatorship,” attributing the silence to passivity, denial, and

indifference instead [201]. However German citizens were aware of the forcible sterilization of those in mental hospitals and other institutions in 1934, the forced sterilization of Afro-German children in 1937, the eradication of vagrants, prostitutes, alcoholics, and others who were considered unfit for society, and although the “euthanasia program” was conducted in secrecy and was protested once the word leaked out, these happenings would hardly provoke uniform ‘indifference.’ “First-degree Mischlinge” was not banned from service in the reserve police until October 1942, and the “second-degree Mischlinge” not until April 1943, something Browning mentions when he makes a case for reservists not fitting “Himmler’s notion of the new Nazi racial aristocracy,” and yet he somehow completely misses the implications of the above stated information [177]. These ordinary men could have had two Jewish grandparents, or one Jewish grandparent, they could have had a history of mental illness in the family, they could have had brothers or cousins who were alcoholics, relatives who were homosexual, each one of those eighty percent who decided to keep killing Jews even though they were given a choice not to, could have had, in their families, in their past relationships or associations, something that would be considered unacceptable under the Nazi Party regime. When Browning speaks of indifference towards the Jews in an authoritarian political climate, he never once considers the very real fear that such a climate must inevitably foster in all of its citizens. The communists, the political opposition, the religious opposition, the gypsies and the mentally ill, the drunks and the prostitutes, the Jews, the Poles and other Slavs, the homosexuals, all were either sterilized or exterminated in the name of German racial purity. How many men from the Police

Battalion 101 could boast of being racially pure? Meanwhile, those found to be helping Jews suffered consequences, and those who were racially pure were not exempt from public hangings, deportation to concentration camps, and on-the-spot shootings. In this climate the ordinary, middle-aged men of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 had left their families behind and found themselves in Poland as executors of the Final Solution. They were, in essence, a military force at war. Even today, the word 'fear' in military, a stereotypically 'macho' environment, is a four-letter word that must not be spoken. To think it would have been different in 1942, or even in 1960 for that matter, is wildly unrealistic. Yes, Browning's multi-causal explanation is plausible, however, it is not complete without acknowledging that fear, although never explicitly stated, is nonetheless a logical outcome of the atrocities committed during the Nazi Party regime.

The last question on the instruction sheet asks what I would have done if I had found myself in the same situation, and I have to admit that while writing this paper, I alternated between two lies. The one where I state that I would have been one of the twenty percent who refused to conform, and the one where, after a long period of introspection, I pretend to find no clear answer. After all, not one person who has not been placed in a similar situation could possibly guess what their choice would be.

When I was eleven years old, I watched a group of kids beat a Muslim-Croatian boy nearly to death, and I said nothing. I was afraid that if they noticed me standing there, one of them just might remember that despite my name and ethnicity, I had grown up reading a Qur'an on my Muslim great-grandmother's knee. In the next two years I pulled away from all the Muslim children I had grown up with, closed my eyes and turned away

dozens of times, and when the Serbian army rolled through the town in armored cars and tanks, I cheered and waved with the other Serbian kids. I was eleven years old and my world had narrowed down to “us” or “them.” I was not aware of the deep-seeded ethnic tensions in my own country, nor did I have access to propaganda. I was not indoctrinated into our version of Serbian Youth, and I had no aversions towards the Muslims I had grown up around. I was raised in a household where discrimination of any kind was not acceptable. And yet none of that mattered next to the fear I felt for myself, and for my family. That fear carried me through many things I will forever be ashamed of, and in only a few years, it had taken root so deeply that I carry remnants of it to this day. If it had come down to pulling a trigger, I can honestly say that I have no answer. Luckily, no one had placed a gun in my hands. However, I have a sneaking suspicion that if I dug deep enough, the answer would not be a pleasant one.

Disclaimer:

The information stated in this paper which was not drawn from Browning’s *Ordinary Men* comes from general knowledge obtained in an Eastern European grade school, college Philosophy and History classes, and a well-worn, dog-eared copy of Klemperer’s *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years*.